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(Continued from last week)

CHAPTER VIII. Korak and Merlem.

For many months the strange life of the three went on unmarked by any unusual occurrences—at least without any occurrences that seemed unusual to the youth or the ape—but to the little girl it was a constant nightmare of horrors for days and weeks until she, too, became accustomed to gazing into the eyesockets of death and to the feel of the icy wind of his shroudlike mantle.

Slowly she learned the rudiments of the only common medium of thought exchange which her companions possessed—the language of the great apes. More quickly she perfected herself in jungle craft, so that the time soon came when she was an important factor in the chase, watching while the others slept or helping them to trace the spoor of whatever prey they might be stalking.

Akut accepted her on a footing which bordered upon equality when it was necessary for them to come into close contact, but for the most part he avoided her. The youth always was kind to her, and in there were many occasions upon which he felt the burden of her presence he hid it from her.

Finding that the night damp and chill caused her discomfort and even suffering, Korak constructed a tight little shelter high among the swaying branches of a giant tree. Here little Merlem slept in comparative warmth and safety, while the Killer and the ape perched upon nearby branches, the former always before the entrance to the lofty domicle, where he best could guard its inmate from the dangers of arboreal enemies.

After the construction of the shelter the activities of the three became localized. They ranged less widely, for there was always the necessity of returning to their own tree at nightfall.

A river flowed near by. Game and fruit were plentiful, as were fish also. Existence had settled down to the daily humdrum of the wild—the search for food and the sleeping upon tall belfies. They looked no further ahead than today.

If the youth thought of his past and of those who longed for him in the distant metropolises it was in a detached and impersonal sort of way, as though that other life belonged to another creature than himself. He had given up hope of returning to civilization, for, since his various rebuffs at the hands of those to whom he had looked for friendship, he had wandered so far inland as to realize that he was completely lost in the mazes of the jungle.

Then, too, since the coming of Merlem he had found in her that one thing which he had missed before in his savage jungle life—human companionship.

The little girl idolized him, as she might have idolized an indulgent brother had she had one. Love was a thing unknown to either. But as the youth neared manhood it was inevitable that it should come to him, as it did to every other savage jungle male.

As Merlem became proficient in their common language the pleasures of their companionship grew correspondingly, for now they could converse, and, aided by the mental powers of their human heritage, they amplified the restricted vocabulary of the apes until talking was transformed from a task into an enjoyable pastime.

When Korak hunted Merlem usually accompanied him, for she had learned the fine art of silence when silence was desirable. She could pass through the branches of the great trees now with all the agility and stealth of the Killer himself. Great heights no longer appalled her. She swung from limb to limb, or she raced through the mighty branches, sure footed, lithe and fearless. Korak was very proud of her, and even old Akut granted in approval where before he had growled in contempt.

A distant village of blacks had furnished her with a mantle of fur and feathers, with copper ornaments and weapons, for Korak would not permit her to go unarmed or unadorned in the use of the weapons he stole for her. A light spear and a long knife were her weapons of offense or defense.

Her body, rounding into the fullness of an early maturity, followed the lines of a Greek goddess, but there the similarity ceased, for her face was beautiful.

As she grew more accustomed to the jungle and the ways of its wild denizens, fear left her. As time wore on she even hunted alone when Korak and Akut were prowling at a great distance, as they were sometimes forced to do when game was scarce in their immediate vicinity. Upon these occasions she usually confined her endeavors to the smaller animals, though sometimes she brought down a deer and once even Horta, the boar, a great tusker that might have made even Sheeta think twice before attacking him.

After Korak had left the village of the blacks following his last thieving expedition the screams of women and children had brought the warriors in from the forest and the river. Great

was the excitement and hot was the rage of the men when they learned that the white devil had again entered their homes, frightened their women and stolen arrows and ornaments and food.

Even their superstitious fear of this weird creature who hunted with a huge bull ape was overcome in their desire to wreak vengeance upon him and rid themselves for good and all of the menace of his presence in the jungle.

And so it was that a score of the fleetest and most doughty warriors of the tribe set out in pursuit of Korak and Akut but a few minutes after they had left the scene of the Killer's many depredations.

The little party of warriors was led by Kovudoo, the chief, a middle aged savage of exceptional cunning and bravery. It was he who first came within sight of the quarry which they had followed for hours by the mysterious methods of their almost uncanny powers of observation, intuition and even scent.

The white youth and the white maid stood alone in the jungle when they were discovered by Kovudoo's band. Akut had been made king of his ape tribe, and Korak, to Akut's sorrow, had left him to dwell with Merlem in the jungle. One of Kovudoo's men leaned close to the ear of his chief.

"Look!" he whispered and pointed to something that dangled at the girl's side. "When my brother and I were slaves in the village of the black my brother made that thing for the white little daughter. She played with it always and called it after my brother, whose name is Geeka. Just before we escaped some one came and struck down the black, stealing his daughter away. If this is she the black will pay you well for her return."

Korak's arm had gone around the shoulders of Merlem. And then from behind him broke a hideous bedlam of savage war cries, and a score of shrieking blacks were upon them.

Korak turned to give battle. Merlem with her own light spear stood by his side. An avalanche of barbed missiles flew about them. One pierced Korak's shoulder, another his leg, and he went down.

Merlem was unscathed for the blacks had intentionally spared her. Now they rushed forward to finish Korak and make good the girl's capture. But as they came there came also from another point in the jungle the great Akut and at his heels the huge bills of his new kingdom.

Snarling and roaring, they rushed upon the black warriors when they saw the mischief they had already wrought. Kovudoo, realizing the danger of coming to close quarters with these mighty ape men, seized Merlem and called upon his warriors to retreat.

For a time the apes followed them, and several of the blacks were badly mauled and one killed before they succeeded in escaping. Nor would they have got off thus easily had Akut not been more concerned with the condition of the wounded Korak than with their own safety.

CHAPTER IX.
When Thieves Fall Out.

So the two Swedes approached the village of Kovudoo with friendly words upon their tongues and deep craft in their hearts. Their plans were well made. There was no mention of the white prisoner. They chose to pretend that they were not aware that Kovudoo had a white prisoner. They exchanged gifts with the old chief, lagging with his plenipotentiaries over the value of what they were to receive for what they gave, as is customary and proper when one has no ulterior motives. Unwarranted generosity would have aroused suspicion.

During the palaver which followed they recalled the gossip of the villages through which they had passed, receiving in exchange such news as Kovudoo possessed. The palaver was long and tiresome, as these native ceremonies always are to Europeans. Kovudoo made no mention of his prisoner, and from his generous efforts of guides and presents seemed anxious to assure himself of the speedy departure of his guests.

It was Malblin who, quite casually, near the close of their talk, mentioned the fact that the sheik was dead. Kovudoo evinced interest and surprise.

"You did not know it?" asked Malblin. "That is strange. It was during the last moon. He fell from his horse when the beast stepped in a hole. The horse fell upon him. When his men came up the sheik was quite dead."

Kovudoo scratched his head. He was much disappointed. No sheik meant no ransom for the white girl.

"I know where there is a white girl," he said unexpectedly. "If you wish to buy her she may be had cheap."

Malblin shrugged. "We have trouble enough, Kovudoo," he said, "without burdening ourselves with an old, broken down sheik, and as for paying for one"—Malblin snapped his fingers.

"She is young," said Kovudoo, "and good looking."

All during his rational moments as he had lain upon the soft furs which lined Merlem's nest he had suffered more acutely from fears for Merlem than from the pain of his own wounds. For her he must live; for her he must regain his strength that he might set out in search of her. But it was many a day before strength returned to him.

Merlem, bound and under heavy guard in Kovudoo's own hut, had no doubt but that Korak would come back and still less that he would easily free her.

So now as she lay waiting for him she dreamed of him and of all that he meant to her. She compared him with the sheik, her father, and at the thought of the stern, grizzled old Arab she shuddered. Even the savage blacks had been less harsh to her than he.

Not understanding their tongue, she could not guess what purpose they had in keeping her a prisoner. She knew that some one must, and she had expected to be eaten, but she had been with them for some time now, and no harm had befallen her.

She did not know that a runner had been dispatched to the distant village of the sheik to barter with him for a ransom. She did not know, nor did Kovudoo, that the runner had never reached his destination; that he had fallen in with the safari of Jensen and Malblin and with the talkativeness of a native had unfolded his whole mission to the black servants of the two Swedes.

These had not been long in retelling the matter to their masters, and the result was that when the runner left their camp to continue his journey he had scarce passed from sight before there came the report of a rifle, and he rolled lifeless into the underbrush with a bullet hole in his back.

A few moments later Malblin strode back into the encampment, where he went to some pains to let it be known that he had had a shot at a big black and missed. The Swedes knew that their men hated them and that an overt act against Kovudoo would quickly be carried to the chief at the first opportunity. Nor were they sufficiently strong in either guns or loyal followers to risk antagonizing the vengeful old chief.

The next day the Swedes set out for Kovudoo's village, bent on securing possession of the person of the white girl whom Kovudoo's runner had told them lay captive in the chief's village. How they were to accomplish their end they did not know. There was out of the question, though they would not have hesitated to use it had they possessed it.

In former years they had marched roughshod over enormous areas, taking toll by brute force even when kindness or diplomacy would have accomplished more. But now they were in bad straits—so bad that they had not shown their true colors scarce twice in a year, and then only when they came upon an isolated weak village.

Kovudoo was not of these, and, though his village was in a way remote from the more populous district to the north, his power was such that he maintained an acknowledged suzerainty over the thin thread of villages which connected him with the savage lands to the north.

To have antagonized him would have spelled ruin for the Swedes. It would have meant that they might never reach civilization by the northern route. To the west the village of the sheik lay directly in their path, barring them effectually. To the east the trail was unknown to them, and to the south there was no trail.

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The Swedes laughed. "There are no good looking white women in the jungle, Kovudoo," said Jensen. "You should be ashamed to try to make fun of old friends."

Kovudoo sprang to his feet. "Come," he said, "I will show you."

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the dim interior they discerned the figure of a woman lying bound upon a sleeping mat.

Malblin took a single glance and turned away. "She must be a thousand years old, Kovudoo," he said as he left the hut.

"She is young!" cried the savage. "It is dark in here. You cannot see. Wait. I will have her brought out in the sunlight." And he commanded the two warriors who watched the girl to cut the bonds from her ankles and lead her forth for inspection.

Malblin and Jensen evinced no eagerness, though both were fairly bursting with it, not to see the girl, but to obtain possession of her. They cared not if she had the face of a musket or the figure of pot bellied Kovudoo himself. All that they wished to know was that she was the girl who had been stolen from the sheik several years before. They thought that they would recognize her for such if she were indeed the same. But even so, the testimony of the runner Kovudoo had sent to the sheik was such as to assure them that the girl was the one they had once before attempted to abduct.

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